

Today Rep. Pete Stark (D-CA), Rep. Robert Matsui (D-CA) and several additional members of Congress joined together to introduce the “Disabled Workers Opportunity Act of 2001,” a bill to make Medicare Part A coverage permanent for disabled, working beneficiaries who qualify for SSDI. This legislation builds on the Ticket-to-Work and Work Incentives Act signed into law last year which made important, long overdue improvements for disabled workers, but continues to limit Medicare enrollment to 8.5 years after returning to work.

“The Disabled Workers Opportunity Act completes the job Congress began last year with enactment of the Ticket-to-Work and Work Incentives Act. That legislation gave disabled workers a temporary ticket back into the workforce. Our new bill makes that ticket permanent. If enacted, no disabled worker who qualifies for SSDI would have to quit work in order to keep their Medicare coverage,” said Rep. Stark.

Citing data from a recent National Organization on Disability survey, Rep. Stark continued, “Even though the majority of people with disabilities want to work, fewer than one-third are actively employed. The problem is that disabled workers risk losing their Medicare coverage when they return to work – even though many jobs lack the health benefits disabled workers depend upon to stay employed. Health insurance is a vital need for all workers. But, if you are disabled, it is a need that may well spell life or death. It simply makes no sense to encourage someone to return to work and then force them to choose between that work and their health. But, that is exactly what current law requires.”

Rep. Stark continued, “Last week, President Bush announced his ‘New Freedom Initiative’ which shares the same goal as our legislation we are introducing today – to help people with disabilities becoming working members of our community. We urge the President to join with us to make this small, but critical improvement to current law and really providing a permanent ticket to work for our citizens with disabilities.”

Rep. Matsui added, “Congress should tear down barriers that prevent creative and productive people from performing the work they are good at and love to do. The Disabled Workers Opportunity Act is a perfect example. This bill guarantees permanent Medicare coverage to people with disabilities who return to work and removes the awful burden of choosing between a long term career or health insurance benefits.”

The Disabled Workers Opportunity Act has been endorsed by a variety of consumer and provider disability groups. Tony Yong, chairperson of the Consortium for Citizens with Disabilities, stated, “This legislation would fulfill the original intent of the Medicare provisions of the Ticket-to-Work and Work Incentives Improvement Act of 1999 by guaranteeing that SSA beneficiaries who return to work can keep their critical health coverage under Medicare.”